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THE PUBLIC EYE

Stressed dams across state often go years without repairs

RANDALL BENTON rbenton@sacbee.com

Rollins Dam on the Bear River in Nevada County has a valve that hasn't opened or shut properly since 2014. In 2016, the Nevada Irrigation District, which owns the dam, told inspectors that it was designing replacement parts. Installation was expected in November, but it's still unclear if the work was completed.

OWEN BREWER Sacramento Bee file photo

This Folsom Dam gate buckled on July 17, 1995, releasing nearly half of the reservoir's water over the next week or so – a failure that could have proved disastrous for downstream residents in Sacramento if it had happened during the rainy season.

When inspectors spot flaws, the fixes are delayed and Oroville crisis shows little things can add up

BY RYAN SABALOW AND DALE KASLER
rsabalow@sacbee.com

When it comes to inspecting dams, California is second to none. A panel of national experts examined the state's Division of Safety of Dams last year and declared it tops in the field, citing inspectors' knack for flagging small problems before they turn serious.

Getting dam owners to fix those flaws quickly is another matter.

A Sacramento Bee investigation prompted by the nearly catastrophic failure of Oroville Dam's flood-control spillway in February found that owners of some of California's most important dams – those whose failure could cause residents downstream to lose their lives – often allow deficiencies to linger for years – even though these shortcomings get cited repeatedly in annual inspection reports.

Cracked concrete goes unpatched. Rusted equipment goes unrepaired. Sensors that measure pressure inside dams stay broken. Valves and gates that release water from reservoirs remain frozen in place.

Operators sometimes fail to clear out clogged drainage systems critical to maintaining the structural integrity of spillways and dams. They're also slow to remove trees, brush and other vegetation whose roots can clog drains, weaken earthen dams or undermine slabs of concrete.

State officials said the prob-

SEE DAMS, 10A

MORE INSIDE
Cracks, clogged drains, broken valves among litany of problems at dams. 10A

VIDEO
A valve at Rollins Reservoir hasn't opened or shut properly since 2014. sacbee.com

Crews get an upper hand on several wildfires, but red flag warnings remain

BY MELISSA ETEHAD, RUBEN VIVES AND SARAH PARVINI
Los Angeles Times

LOS ANGELES

Firefighters hoped to make more progress Saturday against the wildfires burning from Ojai to Oceanside that have destroyed more than 790 structures and forced tens of thousands to flee from their homes.

As Santa Ana winds finally died down Friday, crews were able to begin containment of some of the biggest fires. But red flag fire warnings remain in effect, and forecasters say the Santa Anas will return to Southern California on Saturday evening.

California Gov. Jerry Brown surveyed the devastation in Ventura, the area hardest hit by this week's firestorms. Brown's visit Saturday comes four days after he declared a state of emergency.

In all, there are six wildfires burning in Southern California. About 8,500 firefighters are battling the fires, which have collectively burned 175,000 acres.

"We're facing a new reality in this state, where fires threatened people's lives, their properties, their neighborhoods and billions and billions of dollars.

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